

## **Book Review**

Paul W. Mathews. *Asian Cam Models: Digital Virtual Virgin Prostitutes?* Quezon City: Giraffe Books, 2010. 166 pages.

**Aileen Paguntalan-Mijares**

*Asian Cam Models: Digital Virtual Virgin Prostitutes?* written by Paul W. Mathews is a pioneering study of the ACM (Adult/Asian Cam Model) industry in the Philippines. A growing industry, ACM-ing involves young Filipinas who chat with customers on-line via a webcam, and are paid for private shows (prvt) that usually involve models stripping, dancing and romping on camera and performing sexually explicit shows for their clients. Promoted as a lucrative industry, it has lured scores of young 'Asians' who are practically all Pinays into the cyber porn industry. Poverty and lack of other opportunities are the push factors indicated in the study, with women capitalizing on their youth and sexuality. When asked, however, if they consider themselves as prostitutes, the women vehemently deny being so, with others insisting on their virginity. Mathews asks, if ACMs constitute pornography, can they be simultaneously prostitutes (p.104)?

The book outlines the intricacies of the industry as experienced by young Filipina ACMs, and weaves in the interconnections of economics, labor relations, gender and sexuality, globalization/glocalization, and digital technology phenomena. Mathews zeroes in on the paradox of "modern capitalism that creates and facilitates a system of work and exploitation that is pre-industrial". Utilizing Marxist as well as Marxist feminist frameworks, Mathews exposes the exploitative nature of the cyber technology industry which involves objectification and commoditization of women's labor and sexuality.

Piecework labor arrangements enable Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to exploit women's labor. The women end up with measly amounts incommensurate with the labor and time they put into their 'jobs'. As one could spend the whole day on the web but get paid only for the actual time spent on private shows, ACMs have to convince potential customers to get them to do private shows so they can meet their quotas and get compensated. The case studies provide ample evidence of the unfair labor practices among

ACMs and their ISPs, at times with women falling prey to unscrupulous employers who may try to demand sexual favors in exchange for 'job security'.

Mathews shows how ACMs capitalize not only on their looks, which includes advertising one's youth through use of the teddy bear as a prop, but also pandering to customer's fantasies by projecting themselves as subservient females— always smiling, pleasant, and accommodating despite the lewd and salacious remarks being thrown at them. Customers are made to believe in their masculinity and ability to sexually gratify the women. This fits with the feminist critique of pornography's objectification and sexism where women, according to Lynn Segal (1992), are reduced to "passive, perpetually desiring bodies – or bits of bodies—eternally available for servicing men" (as cited in Attwood 2004). As Mathews points out, clients seem to go for girls who seem to be 'having fun' and enjoying themselves, which contrasts to how these 'working gurls' consider ACM-ing as merely a job like any other.

Mathews points out the similarities in the strategies employed by ACMs and prostitutes— like personalizing the relationship with a client with the hope that continued ties with a client could lead to a 'real' relationship (Mathews 1987:30). They make use of their emotional labor to win over potential customers by pandering to their whims and always reinventing themselves. As with prostitution, at times, ACMs do believe such emotional investment could eventually land them potential boyfriends, or husbands, who can whisk them away from their impoverished state.

An interesting part of the chapter on "Working Gurls" is the participation of transgenders (TG or TS) who appear to subvert traditional notions of being *bakla* in the Philippines. Mathews points to emergent sexual cultures where the "TG now fully subscribe to a heterosexual binary: she not only provides sex as the traditional *bakla* had, but also, like a real woman, she is paid for that sex, whereas previously it was the *bakla* who had paid for sex" (p. 57).

Mathews calls his method 'netography' (also known as 'nethnography', or 'netnography') or cyber ethnography and employs a 'participant experienter' rather than the conventional 'participant observation' method in anthropology, noting the limitations of online research which does not allow him to directly observe other participants, but rather to experience the interactions via reading and posting of messages. His study is based on one

chatroom, *Asian Playmates*, where he logged on as both guest and member, noting the different responses he would get when he logs in as a guest or non-paying client. Issues on authenticity can be tricky particularly on the side of the clientele who hide behind their anonymity.

The author was evidently a bit uneasy about his ‘voyeuristic’ approach given the nature of the research and the level of engagement with some ACMs. I liked his reflexive approach to some dilemmas he had in doing the research; particularly poignant was his effort to help out an ACM who sought his assistance. There were a few other incidents however that bothered me, particularly the one where an ACM broke down when the author showed her websites of other ACMs. It reminded me of Dorinne Kondo’s work ‘*Crafting Selves*’ where realization of her ‘identity’ became quite a shock to her. This was triggered by her reflection that showed her becoming an epitome of a Japanese housewife. In the same manner, an ACM’s encounter with other ACMs became a stark revelation of an identity she may not have readily accepted as her own. The very male scrutiny/gaze is also perturbing, as described in the following manner:

*Wildslaver* (alias 99centAsian4u and hotass69) was perhaps an even less endearing ACM. She was not the most attractive ACM on this ISP, and in fact a little obese and Plain, although she may have had what some might consider, and desire, a “native” face with broad nose, solid brow and dark skin. She had short, rather unkempt hair, used no cosmetics, sat too close to the cam, and wore rather unattractive and often full clothing that revealed little or nothing of her body and sexuality. She was rather naïve, once having given a free show to a client in expectation that he would subsequently take her in prvt or send her money. Her studio was very bland, consisting of a plain and rather dirty room, unlike others who had attractive backdrops.

She was also naïve in that she was fully unaware of other girls and their performances on *Asian Playmates*. Over a few weeks of talking with her I was able to suggest ways that she could improve her appearance and repertoire so as to attract more customers, as she often articulated the problem of not meeting her quota. In an attempt to see and learn for herself, I directed her to view *SweetChelsea*, who was at that moment also online. I was surprised to discover that *Wildslaver* did not even know the web address (URL) of the very site on which she herself appeared...

Wildslaver did eventually log-on to Asian Playmates as a guest (after I provided the URL to her) and found *SweetChelsea*, who at that moment was performing a teasing dance. At this moment *Wildslaver*, still on cam with me, recoiled into a corner, in almost shock: she backed into a corner of her studio, stared at what she could see of *SweetChelsea*, placed her head in her arms, then looked up, openly weeping. In an instant *Wildslaver* had realized who she was, what she looked like and how she could/should be otherwise (pp.42-43).

This encounter highlights the tensions surrounding ACM-ing. While women consider being ACMs as less dangerous and more decent than being prostitutes or strippers ('just look but don't touch'), the above vignette cannot but bring out the 'moral' dimensions of ACM-ing. In the chapter "Media, Moralists, Porn, Prostitutes and Strippers" Mathews decries the 'public myopia' (p.78) surrounding ACMs in the Philippine. Focusing on tabloids and blogs, Mathews outlines the reactions towards ACMs or 'cybersex' which are focused on sex and sex exploitation as well as economic benefits for women. For him, most arguments are a rehash of issues concerning prostitution, child sexuality, pornography, sex tourism, 'mail-order' brides, and trafficking. What makes the chapter interesting is Mathews' unabashed riposte to the blogs, with attempts at correcting misinformation regarding ACMs or pornography and prostitution for that matter. The exchanges take us back to familiar discourses regarding choice or agency versus victimization. Is there really a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification or a new and pernicious form of objectification? (Gill 2003). This was seen in discussions where ACMs talk about pleasure derived from being desired. Mathews makes a case against generalizations regarding ACMs. While Philippine laws need to be clear on definitions of what constitutes pornography and prostitution, there are a lot of gray areas that can only be answered by detailed ethnographic work.

While an exploratory study, the book does more by interrogating long-held assumptions regarding the sex industry, bringing new insights into the realities of ACM work. It spells out the work that needs to be done to uncover the paradoxes of this 'glocalized' industry, where as Mathews states, "technology may possibly liberate women and sexuality, but it also simultaneously perpetuates and even entrenches sexual and economic inequality" (p.132).

**References Cited**

- Attwood, F. (2004). Pornography and objectification: Re-reading "the picture that divided Britain". *Feminist Media Studies*, 4 , 7-19.
- Gill, R. (2003). From sexual objectification to sexual subjectification: The resexualization of women's bodies in the media. *Feminist Media Studies*, 3 , 100-105.
- Kondo, D. K. (1990). *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mathews, P.W. (1987). Some Preliminary Observations of Male Prostitution in Manila, *Philippine Sociological Review*, 35(3-4):30

---

✉ **Aileen Paguntalan-Mijares**. PhD. candidate, The Australian National University. Email: <aileen.paguntalan@anu.edu.au>